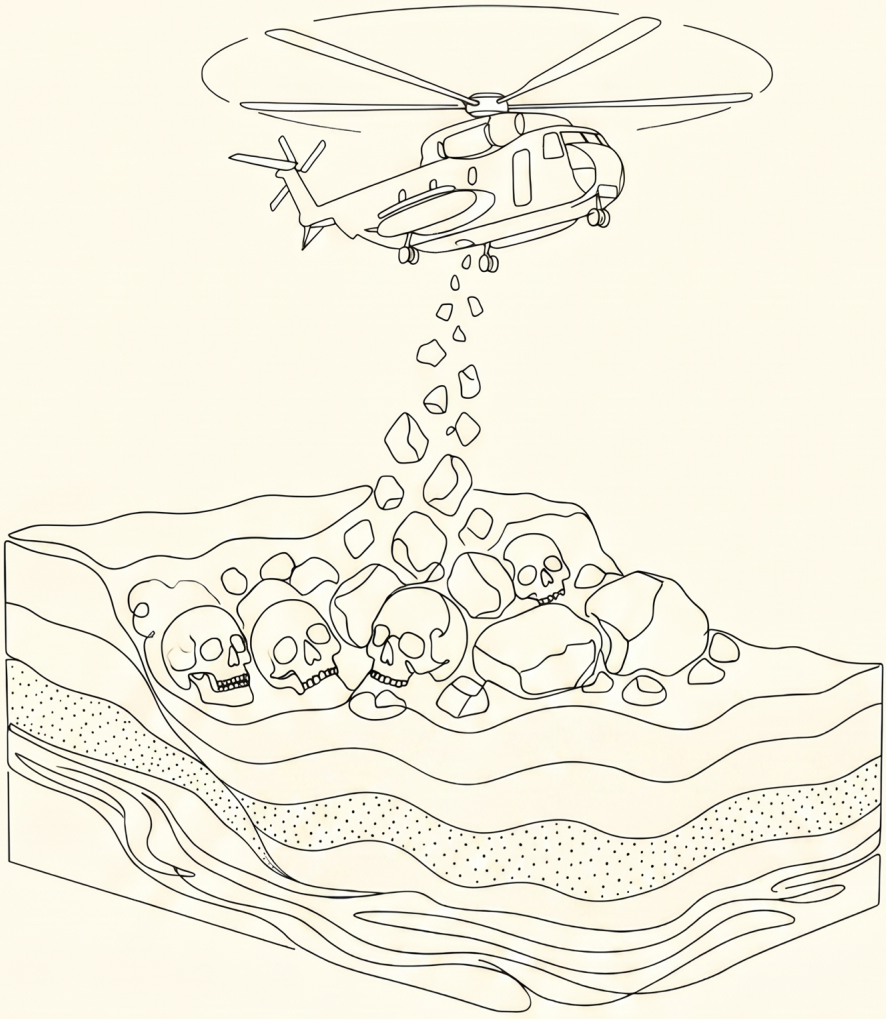

THE RIVER LIES

Kennewick Man and his Burials

By C. Green

May 2026

(C) C. Green. CC-BY-SA

THE INITIAL INCIDENT was a scene from *Stand By Me*. It was July 1996, the dead of summer, and the air along the Columbia River in Washington State was thick with heat and the roar of engines. The annual Water Follies hydroplane races were tearing up the river in the distance. In the shallows upstream, a twenty-one-year-old named Will Thomas and a nineteen-year-old named Dave Deacy were sneaking into the event along the riverbank. The water along the sheer cut bank was perhaps a foot and a half deep. Thomas's foot bumped into something hard in the murky river mud. He reached down and pulled up what he initially assumed was a round rock. He wiped away the slick mud. He was holding a human skull. The boys stashed the skull in the bushes and made their way to watch the race. Afterwards they found a bucket, retrieved the skull and brought it to a police officer. They returned to the location and found more bones in the water. It was handed over to the local coroner as a crime scene. The bones were determined to be old, perhaps 19th century, and it eventually found its way to a young local anthropologist named James Chatters. The bones were dated to about 9,000 years old. Chatters understood immediately it was the find of a lifetime, the most complete human skeleton of that age ever found in North America. By comparison, the oldest Egyptian mummy ever found, "Ginger", is a mere 5,500 years old.

Chatters noted in his initial report that the facial morphology lacked the broad face and prominent cheekbones typically associated with modern Native Americans in the region. To describe this anomaly, he utilized an archaic, nineteenth-century structural term: "Cauca-

soid." In the context of physical anthropology, the term denoted a narrower face and a more projecting nose. Popular media seized on the word, broadcasting to the world the possible discovery of a 9,000-year-old white man. The story was too good not to repeat, ending up in a prominent *60 Minutes* episode with Lesley Stahl.

The fallout was instantaneous, triggering a multi-front cultural war. The narrative energized white supremacist groups who latched onto the headlines. Simultaneously, it deeply concerned local Native American tribes—the Umatilla, the Yakama, the Nez Perce, the Colville, and the Wanapum. They claimed the remains under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. This act, created only a few years earlier in 1990, was a desperately needed legal bulwark against centuries of institutionalized grave robbing. For generations, indigenous burial grounds had been treated by academics and collectors as open-air quarries. Thousands of their ancestors' skulls and skeletons had been packed into crates and shipped off to the back rooms of the Smithsonian or European natural history museums to be cataloged as scientific curiosities. The government sided with the tribes.

On the opposite side of the battlefield, a coalition of prominent scientists sued the federal government, seeking an injunction to study what they recognized as a vital key to understanding how the Americas were originally populated. In 1996, the timeline of the ancient Americas was largely considered settled. The prevailing orthodoxy—the "Clovis First" model—dictated that the first humans arrived via the Bering Land Bridge roughly 13,000 years ago, possessing a specific, uniform

morphology. Kennewick Man, with his 9,000-year-old dating and highly unusual cranial structure, was an explosive anomaly that threatened to upend this map. To the coalition of prominent scientists who filed the injunction, it was an irreplaceable primary source capable of rewriting textbooks and redefining the peopling of a hemisphere.

The federal government, specifically the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers which managed the river, was caught in the center of a zero-sum legal deadlock and a public relations nightmare. Their solution to this anthropological crisis was roughly equivalent to hitting a static-filled television with a sledgehammer. They couldn't resolve the fight, so they decided to physically eliminate the battleground.

On April 6, 1998, under the legal guise of "bank stabilization" and erosion control, the Army Corps mobilized Boeing CH-47 Chinook and UH-1 Iroquois military helicopters. They dropped four million pounds of riprap, concrete, and topsoil directly onto the 250-foot stretch of the discovery zone. They then laid down geometric grids of coconut-coir erosion fabric and aggressively planted native Coyote Willows, obliterating the original five-foot alluvial cutbank and transforming the vertical drop-off into a forty-five-degree, heavily armored, bioengineered ramp.

If you attempt to locate this site today using Google Earth, the river lies to you. Over the last three decades, those Coyote Willows have matured into a dense, unbroken green canopy that mimics the natural riparian ecology. The Army Corps uses this exact riprap-and-willow technique all along the Columbia for standard

salmon habitat restoration, turning the shoreline into a kaleidoscope of false positives.

The legal record was overwritten right alongside the physical landscape. The lawyers involved in *Bonnichsen v. United States* cited the Archaeological Resources Protection Act to deliberately scrub all precise GPS data from the public transcripts. They left behind functionally useless, redacted placeholders like "near Kennewick" or "Columbia River Mile 330"—a designation that spans an entire mile of shore.

To pierce the mystery of where he was found, you have to abandon the curated internet and look for what the government accidentally left behind before the helicopters arrived.

Just months prior to the 1998 rock drop, the Army Corps dispatched a team of geologists to rigorously assess the site. Before digging profile trenches, surveyors laid down a precise baseline along a 350-meter stretch of the beach, logging the exact coordinates of the natural riverbank and crucially pinpointing where the bones were found.

When the government later scrubbed the legal transcripts and high-level maps, they overlooked the geologists' technical report. Buried among the trillion document Internet Archive Wayback Machine, are the raw, pre-intervention surveyor coordinates. However, they were logged in an archaic, localized grid system invented in 1929 that is no longer in use. Furthermore there is a typo (or misdirection) about the "Zone" where the site is located.

By extracting the specific measurements, correcting the zone typo, and running the 1997 data through a

modern geodetic converter, the archaic grid snaps into Latitude and Longitude coordinates. When you drop those coordinates into a satellite map, what emerges from the green canopy is a barely noticeable but unnatural geometric rectangle of willows along the Columbia River shoreline. Nature does not plant trees in a grid. They remembered to bury the site, but they forgot to bury the surveyor's logs. As Barack Obama once said: "One of the things you learn as president is the government is terrible at keeping secrets."

It is important to remember that in the spring of 1998, the burial of Site 45BN495 was not some clandestine, midnight black-ops run. The sheer mechanics of the operation made immediate secrecy impossible: you cannot quietly deploy twin-rotor Chinook helicopters to drop four million pounds of boulders within clear eyesight of a public parkway. The entire town of Kennewick watched the erasure happen in broad daylight; the local college boys who first pulled the skull from the mud are still alive, and the scientists who desperately fought for the site still carry the memory. The government's strategy was a soft cover-up amplified by the inevitable friction of time - people die and forget and records are hard to find.

The final, lingering question is how the soft mud of a riverbank held a skeleton against the violent currents of the mighty Columbia for ninety centuries. The answer is a 9,000-year perfect storm of taphonomy and preservation that reveals how lucky and rare the find actually is.

Between 12,000 and 19,000 years ago, the catastrophic Missoula Floods scoured Eastern Washington, dumping

immense, immovable bars of unsorted gravel and cobble. Between these concrete-like bumpers, a protected, low-energy "slackwater cove" formed where river silt collected creating soft ground. Here, Kennewick Man was buried by his ancestors next to the shoreline where the earth was easy to dig. Over millennia, the fine-grained mud accumulated at a glacial pace of 0.4 millimeters per year, slowly burying him deeper. A thick blanket of volcanic ash from the eruption of Mount Mazama 6,700 years ago sealed the layers. As the water table fluctuated, calcium carbonate-rich groundwater moved through the soil, chemically cementing the mud into rock-hard concretions.

This vault of earth and calcium cement survived 9,000 years, but it could not survive forty years of twentieth-century infrastructure. In 1953, the completion of the McNary Lock and Dam filled Lake Wallula, permanently raising the water against the ancient terrace. The unnatural reservoir pool deeply saturated the mud while boat wakes continuously undercut the bank. When the regional floods of 1996 rapidly receded, the heavy, waterlogged bank suffered a shear failure. A block of the terrace snapped off and spilled into the shallows, delivering the ancient traveler to the feet of two wading college students.

DNA testing in 2015 definitively proved the tribes were right all along. His DNA has a best fit match to modern Native Americans. A 2014 Smithsonian forensic taphonomy study revealed something else interesting. He was laid flat on his back, parallel to the Columbia River. His head was pointed east, upstream, deliberately elevated on a slight incline. His feet pointed west,

facing downstream. For the Paleoarchaic peoples, the river was their highway and their cosmology. Laying a man intimately close to the water, perfectly aligned with the current, feet pointing downstream, is a profoundly symbolic departure. He was a traveler stepping into the flow, continuing his journey downriver to the ocean. Evidenced showed he spent much of his life in Alaskan waters subsisting mainly on seal and salmon. Perhaps he or his tribe had migrated to the warmer south during his older years, or he died while on a long journey from or to Alaska.

There is a temptation to view the Columbia River Basin as an engine of archaeological discovery. The modern dam reservoirs that define the region are causing ongoing erosion all along the shorelines. As the water levels artificially fluctuate, they gnaw at the ancient alluvial terraces, actively churning up millennia of human history. To a casual observer, or an armchair treasure hunter, this might look like a sudden bonanza of discovery, a landscape generously yielding its secrets to the surface. But to the federal agencies managing the river, and more intimately to the local Native American tribes whose ancestors populate those banks, this erosion is not a bonanza. It is an absolute crisis.

In the preservation of artifacts, context is everything. An artifact without its provenance is just a disconnected fragment. When a stone tool or a fragment of bone washes out of a riverbank and tumbles into the shallow water, it loses its stratigraphic metadata. Divorced from the exact geological layer it rested in, the object is stripped of its primary scientific value; it becomes impossible to determine precisely when it was deposited or

what environment surrounded it. Furthermore, for the local tribes, when human remains wash out of the earth, it is not an archaeological opportunity. It is a profound, visceral desecration of an ancestor.

Faced with this ongoing crisis of erosion, the institutional response has shifted away from excavation. You cannot meticulously dig a site that is actively dissolving into the river. Instead, the primary goal of modern river management has become stabilization.

This brings us to a chilling realization about the mechanics of historical preservation. The brute-force method the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers used to bury Archaeological Site 45BN495 in 1998 was born of acute political panic, but the underlying physical mechanism—heavily armoring the banks with riprap and geotextile fabric—is actually the ongoing protocol. In a desperate act of institutional triage, the government and the tribes have aligned on a strategy to protect these highly sensitive, eroding archaeological zones. They seal the banks under synthetic fabric, thousands of tons of imported boulders, and engineered grids of willow trees to lock the earth in place and deter looters.

It is a strategy to stop the desecration of the shoreline, but it leaves us with a haunting question about the dark matter of our physical history. If armoring the banks under impenetrable layers of rock and root is the standard protocol for miles of the Columbia River, we have to ask what else is being sealed away. How many other 9,000-year-old stories, how many other profound human moments of ancient travelers stepping into the flow of the current, are currently being engineered out of existence before we ever even know they are there.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20098716
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2338-2763
© 2026 C. Green.
This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Int. License
CC-BY-SA.